

## Building Social Dialogue over Training and Learning: European and National Developments

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## Building Social Dialogue over Training and Learning: European and National Developments

**ABSTRACT** ■ This article examines recent developments in social dialogue over vocational training and lifelong learning. The central concern is how to develop coherent European policies for increasing social partner influence in this domain, given the diversity of national systems of VET and structures of social dialogue across Europe. The study draws on a survey of 13 countries and concludes that despite these disparities, cross-national differences in social partner involvement are less than might be anticipated. Initiatives like the social partners' *Framework of Actions* are seen as pressures promoting convergence, but this is likely to occur paradoxically as a result of increasing diversity within member states.

**KEYWORDS:** convergence and divergence ■ *Framework of Actions* ■ social dialogue ■ vocational education and training

### Introduction

This article explores social dialogue over vocational education and training (VET) in Europe. The central concern is how to develop coherent European policies for increasing social partner influence in this domain given the diversity of national systems of VET and structures of social dialogue across Europe. Recognizing the importance of these differences, CEDEFOP (*Centre Européen de Développement de Formation Professionnelle*), the Commission's agency for the development of VET, undertook a cross-national survey to identify good practice amenable to transfer.

The main research instrument was a questionnaire dealing with the legal framework and formal representation structures determining education and training policy and social partner participation in related activities in the training system, including both initial vocational training (IVT) and continuing vocational training (CVT). The survey was distributed to the CEDEFOP Refernet national consortium leader, typically based either in the national agency responsible for VET or in the Ministry of Education, in

all EU Member States (at that time numbering 15) and two EFTA countries. By February 2003, when the analysis began, valid responses had been received from 13 countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain and the UK. A return from Sweden was excluded as it did not reply to the questionnaire. The survey was analysed by the author on behalf of CEDEFOP and supplemented by a review of relevant literature and ad hoc discussions with representatives of social partner organizations at European level and in some Member States to validate the findings (Winterton, 2003).

There is a long tradition in Europe of social partner involvement in developing VET policy and practice, both at EU and national levels (EC/UNICE/CEEP/ETUC, 1996; Heidemann et al., 1994). At EU level, social dialogue involving the three social partner organizations (ETUC, UNICE/UEAPME and CEEP) became a central theme of the social dimension of European integration after 1991 (EC, 2002), with the social partner working group on Education and Training concluding four joint opinions within two years. The CEDEFOP study was undertaken in response to renewed efforts by the social partners at European level to engage in autonomous actions to promote learning and development in line with the objectives established at the Lisbon European Council in March 2000. Against a background of policy initiatives to support the development of qualifications and competences at European level, in February 2002 the social partners agreed the *Framework of Actions for the Lifelong Development of Competencies and Qualifications*, increasing their role in training initiatives and establishing mechanisms for annual monitoring and evaluation across the EU (ETUC, UNICE/UEAPME and CEEP, 2002).

European social dialogue on training is especially important at sector level because of the similarity of skills needs in a given sector across Member States, recently recognized in EC initiatives (de Boer et al., 2005; EC, 2003). However dialogue is very uneven: different policy areas are covered in each sector and the outcomes vary (Keller, 2005; Leisink, 2002). Kerckhofs and André (2003) report that between 1979 and 2002, sectoral dialogue committees produced over 200 joint texts, 48 percent of them including provisions relating to VET and increasingly focusing on direct actions or frameworks for actions rather than joint opinions. While sectoral bargaining has sometimes led to cross-sectoral framework agreements (as with teleworking in 2002), Goetschy (2005) notes that the reverse has also occurred, with the *Framework of Actions on Lifelong Development of Competencies and Qualifications* influencing several sectoral dialogue committees. The trend is towards the development of European sector social dialogue *strategies* on lifelong learning.

In line with the OECD *Jobs Study*, EU policy puts strong emphasis on the role of training in increasing economic competitiveness, but at national level there is wide diversity in approaches to training and development as

well as in the skills equilibrium (Crouch et al., 1999). Policy developments designed to enhance cooperation, coordination and coherence, are constrained by such diversity and by differences in arrangements for social dialogue. The next section considers different social dialogue models and national systems of VET, offering a framework of analysis for the empirical detail that follows. Social partner involvement is considered in relation to VET policy-making, VET implementation and initiatives to promote lifelong learning. A concluding section seeks to explain the patterns of variation, offers a prognosis for the likely trajectory of social dialogue over VET and considers the implications of European enlargement.

## **Diverse Models of Social Dialogue and Vocational Training**

The early literature on concertation generally assumed convergence towards a model of interest intermediation and policy-making that was more efficient because it combined better economic performance with greater social inclusion (Regini, 2003). In the absence of evidence of such convergence, recent literature on varieties of capitalism has sought to explain persistent differences in the ways in which economies are organized in terms of economic policy, social welfare, production and labour market regimes and industrial relations systems. Regini (2003) contrasts two approaches: the path-dependency and strategic choice models.

All industrial relations systems share three asymmetries: structural asymmetry between labour and capital; regulatory asymmetry in the labour market because of the imperative role of the state; and institutional asymmetry in the labour market derived from the tendency for rules and practices to endure. But such continuity is contingent and conditional: 'a given institutional arrangement can only last when backed by a basic compromise between the actors' (Traxler, 2003: 143).

State policy has played a key role in maintaining coordinated collective bargaining in the face of international market forces (Traxler et al., 2001). Where states have defended the post-war Keynesian compromise and the associated multi-employer bargaining arrangements, organized industrial relations have continued; where they have failed to do so, or indeed rejected the compromise, the outcome has been disorganized industrial relations, with deregulation of statutory provisions supporting collective bargaining, a decline in membership of representative bodies, a reduction in bargaining coverage and, in some cases, anti-union initiatives, whether by the state, employers or both. Regini (2003) similarly identifies 'deregulation' and 'concertation' as two different tendencies in European economic and social policies; these are 'not static "models" of capitalism' but 'ongoing developments in all European countries' (Traxler, 2003: 149).

Such distinctions are particularly relevant to social dialogue over VET, since diversity between Member States is evident both in the arrangements for social dialogue and in VET systems. Employers' associations and trade unions typically engage in consultation (sharing of information) and negotiation (collective bargaining) as part of the established processes of industrial relations. Social dialogue likewise involves consultation and negotiation, but also connects with wider political processes; where formal tripartite institutions exist, this is normally described as 'concertation'. However, the relationship between the domains of industrial relations and social dialogue varies cross-nationally. In relation to social dialogue over VET, there is little evidence of convergence towards a clearly defined role for the social partners (Halvorsen, 1998).

Equally, national VET systems exhibit substantial diversity. Various typologies have been proposed (Ashton et al., 2000; Calloids, 1994; Campinos-Dubernet and Grando, 1988). These variously distinguish the 'schooling model' where provision may be integrated within general education or delivered through separate training institutions, market-led or enterprise-led models, which may be associated with high- or low-skill strategies, and the 'dual model' of apprenticeship which combines elements of both. With some simplification, two key dimensions of VET systems allow an adequate typology: the *focus* of skill formation (workplace or school) and the *regulation* of the VET system (state or market). Four countries illustrate the differences in these terms: the UK, Germany, France and Italy. In terms of its focus, VET is mostly industry-led and centred on the workplace in the UK and Germany, whereas training is education-led and centred on vocational training schools in Italy and France. The German dual system entails instruction in VET schools in parallel with work-based training, but the curricula focus on workplace needs. Whereas VET is regulated by the state in Germany and France, in the UK and Italy arrangements are market-led, with responsibility for training largely devolved to employers.

The typology based on these two dimensions can be used in analysing the nature and extent of social dialogue over VET policy-making, implementation and initiatives to promote lifelong learning. The countries covered in the survey are allocated tentatively to four ideal-typical categories, indicated in Table 1.

**TABLE 1. Typology of VET Systems**

Focus	Mode of regulation	
	Market-led	State-regulated
Workplace	IE, NL, UK	AT, DE, DK
School	IT	BE, FI, FR, IS, NO, PT, ES, SE

## State-regulated School Focus

In most of the countries, VET is provided by specialized state-regulated schools. While this approach guarantees an adequate volume of training, VET predominantly designed within the formal educational system is not necessarily well adapted to labour market needs. For example, in France most initial vocational training (IVT) is undertaken in full-time vocational schools, even though in-company apprenticeships are financed through an employer tax (Lane, 1989). While a high proportion of young people are qualified to craft or technician level, they are not guaranteed employment in a skilled job (Méhaut, 1992). As Heidemann et al. note (1994), in France there is a lack of coordination between the education and employment systems.

### Policy-making

The state-regulated systems typically define a precise role for the social partners in policy-making, often with long-standing statutory rights. Thus in Belgium the law provides for collective agreements at national, regional and sectoral levels, and these can cover broad social policy issues including the right to vocational training. One outcome in 2000 was a social partner pledge to increase payments to fund continuing vocational training (CVT) and bring Belgium's contributions into line with the average in its three bordering countries, between 1.2 and 1.9 percent of the gross wage bill, within six years.

Similarly in France, the involvement of the social partners in VET policy-making is defined in various articles of the Labour Code: 'vocational training and social advancement form the basis of a concerted policy coordinated chiefly with employers' and employees' organizations'. There is a tripartite National Council for Vocational Training, Social Advancement and Employment (*Conseil national pour la formation professionnelle, le progrès social et l'emploi*), which examines government priorities in education and vocational training. Trade unions are not formally consulted before laws are drafted, but virtually all legislation pertaining to VET is approved in cross-sectoral agreements prior to adoption. At sectoral level, social partners can determine funding volume and prioritize certain types of training or courses (e.g. favour apprenticeship over *alternance* – combined training and work – give preference for training to the low-skilled). These agreements apply to enterprises belonging to signatory employers' associations so are not necessarily generalized throughout the sector.

### Implementation

Social partner organizations are also formally involved in the implementation of VET actions in this group of countries. In Belgium, for example,

they are in charge of planning (defining objectives, target groups and trends) and implementation (application and follow-up). In Finland, they are consulted in the elaboration of the national core curricula, which they can also influence as members of the Training Committees. These are the formal institutions where the social partners can take the initiative to change the study programmes of existing vocational qualifications, but more informal lobbying and consulting of educational authorities are also common. In France, the social partners sit on joint advisory boards (*Commissions professionnelles consultatives*) attached to the various ministries responsible for establishing technical and occupational diplomas and certificates. They can propose new curricula and qualifications and can also propose amendments to existing programmes.

The social partners have less involvement at *local* level in these VET systems. In Finland they are involved in recruitment in those vocational training institutions owned by the sector, but otherwise the national student selection system proposes students to the vocational training institutions, who make the final decision on recruitment. In France, the VET system has become progressively more decentralized through legal changes; and under the regional vocational training development scheme, employment and vocational training coordination committees consult the social partners. Joint sectoral employment bodies also exist at both national and regional levels. In Sweden, the municipalities gained a large degree of freedom to organize vocational education at the upper secondary level within a framework established by parliament and government. Local vocational councils, comprising representatives of employers, employees, the municipality, the school and students, influence the organization of workplace education.

### **Encouraging Participation in Learning**

In several countries, increased participation in training activities has been encouraged through landmark collective agreements. In Belgium, the national agreement of April 2001 included a training section which committed employers to grant all employees at least four days' training during the agreement period. As well as the benefits of expanding or updating employee skills, subscribing to the scheme brought significant financial advantages such as training subsidies, on-site courses and price reductions in more than 120 recognized training institutions. The national agreement of December 2000 called on sectors to implement initiatives to determine the most productive synergies and to strive for optimal definition of target groups, including older workers, non-Belgian ethnic groups and the disabled.

In France, the social partners are involved in collecting and administering the apprenticeship tax which finances training for young people benefiting

from *alternance* work contracts, and the legal minimum payment may be increased by collective agreements. Local training schemes are required to adhere to national standards where national qualifications are involved, but companies also organize additional CVT without qualifications, and works committees are consulted on such training schemes. The cross-sectoral agreement on lifelong learning, signed in September 2003, marked an important development, with a comprehensive text running to 50 pages in all. Among the key innovations is the right to an appraisal interview at least every two years, to identify training and development needs, with opportunities to undertake a skills assessment (*bilan de compétence*) and to have experiential learning validated and accredited. There is a new right to 20 hours' training per year, which can be accumulated over six years. The agreement also provides for employee representatives to play a major role in developing lifelong learning and elaborating training needs at works committee level (Vind et al., 2004).

In Spain, the tripartite continuing training agreement of December 2000 defined the conditions under which companies could obtain government support for implementing CVT in the enterprise, one provision requiring that the training plan be approved by the legal representatives of the workers in the company. In Portugal, integrated training plans are developed from the training plans of individual companies, which are presented to the public authorities for funding. In some cases workers or their representatives are involved in defining the training plan, with a negotiated collective agreement.

## State-regulated Workplace Focus

The countries in this category all have versions of the German dual system of VET, widely seen as the 'gold standard' for IVT (Marry, 1997).

### Policy Determination

Where VET is state-regulated and focused on the workplace, social partner involvement is legally defined as an inherent element. In Austria the social partners are represented on commissions and advisory councils at national and regional level, and are either consulted on, or responsible for, curriculum design and the development of new qualifications. Similarly, in Germany the Vocational Training Act (*Berufsbildungsgesetz*) and the Vocational Training Promotion Act (*Berufsbildungsförderungsgesetz*) define the responsibilities of the bodies involved in monitoring, evaluating and determining VET policy. At national level, the board of the Federal Institute for Vocational Training (*Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung*) consists of equal numbers of representatives from central government, the federal *Länder*,



employers and trade unions. The legislation also defines the responsibilities of the 16 tripartite regional committees for VET (*Länderausschüsse für Berufsbildung*) and their local offices (*zuständige Stellen*). Similarly, in Denmark, the social partners are represented in a council which advises the Minister of Education on all matters concerning the VET system, monitoring labour market trends and recommending new programmes and changes to existing ones.

## Implementation

Social partner involvement in implementing VET decisions, such as developing curricula and qualifications, for example, is extensive. In Austria the social partners are responsible for maintaining the technical institutes (*Fachhochschulen*) which are virtually the only providers of CVT. Training must comply with legally stipulated content, but the implementation is subject to the specific framework conditions in each training enterprise. Statutory regulations dictate the content of the company-based component of apprenticeship training and the social partners make a major contribution to formulating these regulations and ordinances. New vocational qualifications are either already covered by legally stipulated training ordinances, or can be incorporated into the apprenticeship training in the form of additional training content.

In Denmark, the Minister of Education determines the guidelines for each VET programme based on the recommendations of the social partners. These exert a direct influence in laying down the curricular 'framework' for VET programmes through the Advisory Council on VET (*Erhvervsuddannelsesråd*), the National Training Council (*Uddannelsesråd for arbejdsmarkedsuddannelserne*), and the sectoral and occupational committees (*Faglige udvalg*) and continuing training committees (*Efteruddannelsesudvalg*).

In Germany, there are national 'minimum' curricula for VET, but companies are free to go beyond these and large companies frequently do so, creating additional qualifications to meet their own needs and supplement national qualifications. However, by law young people (under 18 years) must only be trained for state recognized qualifications, ensuring employability.

The social partners are also involved in VET implementation at local, company or workplace level. In Denmark, local training institutions possess committees (*Lokale uddannelsesudvalg*) on which unions and employers are represented, through which they can adapt the curriculum to meet local labour market needs and facilitate cooperation with local enterprises. In Germany, the social partners are typically involved at company level in selecting and allocating training subjects. Works councils in companies with five or more employees can request the employer

to undertake a training needs analysis. They are also consulted on the introduction and implementation of training measures; on participation in both internal and external training; and on special training facilities and the selection of trainers. They are also involved in the interview and selection of apprentices and trainees, in which youth representatives have a special brief for equal opportunities and the integration of migrant workers. In Norway, CVT is largely developed at company level with the involvement of the local social partners in determining training curricula and, in some cases co-financing of training.

### Encouraging Participation in Learning

In Austria, the company-based component of apprenticeship training is funded by the individual enterprise but in exceptional cases there are agreements on the funding of additional inter-company training. Enterprises are free to introduce training schemes without reference to national standards and company level collective agreements are sometimes concluded in relation to training plans. In Denmark, employers are required to contribute in proportion to the number of full-time employees to a reimbursement scheme (*Arbejdsgivernes elevrefusion*) which refunds most of the cost of providing IVT. There is a separate procedure for public subsidies for CVT. In Germany, the social partners decide (through tripartite arrangements) on the funding of training schemes, including apprenticeships, run by the Employment Service at national, regional and local level. A levy system (2.5 to 2.8 percent of the wages bill) operates in construction and agriculture and the social partners co-manage the funds, dispersing grants to companies offering approved training and to inter-company training centres. There are collective agreements in many sectors concerning funding of CVT, and works councils often make proposals for paid leave (*Bildungsurlaub*) to participate. In some large companies, the social partners have negotiated agreements on learning time accounts (*Lernzeitkonten*). Under a recent collective agreement (*Tarifvertrag zur Qualifizierung*) in the metal industry of Baden-Württemberg, every employee is entitled to regular updating of skills based on individual personnel development discussions (see also Martinez Lucio et al., this issue).

### Market-regulated School Focus

School-focused VET systems are normally state-regulated, but in the case of Italy VET was until very recently left entirely to market forces. With no binding legislative framework and no obligation on employers to provide training, the ineffectiveness of the system was exacerbated by conflicts between central and local state authorities, the Ministries of Education and Labour, and between capital and labour.

## **Policy-making**

Strong central commitment to social dialogue in Italy created a tripartite VET system in which collective agreements injected a degree of dynamism and reform (Infelise, 1996). However, the system was distorted by the generally low level of educational attainment and serious structural unemployment in the South, which focused social partner attention on remedial education and job creation. A landmark metal-working sectoral agreement in 1973, granting individual workers a right to 150 hours education and training per year, became a model but the provision was restricted to remedying deficiencies in the education system and could not be used for VET (Meghnagi, 1997). While low educational achievement persists, the situation has improved significantly in manufacturing and in the case of white-collar and managerial staff (Jobert, 1997). In 1992, an agreement between the regions and the three main trade unions, which extended school provision and reformed VET legislation, was followed by formal agreements between the three unions and the two main employers' associations. Such national and regional agreements are essentially protocols recording joint interests and common opinions, whereas sector agreements regulate CVT (Heidemann et al., 1994).

## **Implementation**

Widespread unrest over youth unemployment in the South in 1977 led the government to introduce active labour market measures including training provisions, but employers made little use of the training scheme and mainly hired young people on fixed-term contracts. Responsibility for VET was delegated to the regions in 1978 because regional differences in unemployment rates required training to be targeted to local labour market needs, but this also led to fragmentation and inefficiencies in VET provision. Since the regions had no source of funding for their new role, the separation between public (regional) training and VET undertaken by companies became more pronounced and employer-led training became increasingly independent of state provision (Winterton, 2000).

## **Encouraging Participation in Learning**

The Italian VET system suffers from the dominance of small firms in the economy, the failure of unions to prioritize VET in place of remedial education and the absence of tax concessions or grants for training. Large firms train workers but find labour retention a problem, and training centres established by employers are neither externally validated nor regulated. In the absence of publicly funded VET linked to workplaces, a two-tier system of training has emerged, comprising an ineffective formal institutional system and an informal system 'submerged' in small firms.

The 1993 tripartite national ‘protocol’ proposed a permanent system of training needs analysis, jointly managed by unions and employers, to determine regional training provision, but even with a tradition of statutory regulation of the labour market and political support for involving the social partners, trade unions made little progress in translating sector agreements on training into tangible success at enterprise level, partly because the school focus divorces VET from the workplace domain of the social partners.

## **Market-regulated Workplace Focus**

Leaving VET to the market inevitably creates uneven training provision and economies with such systems are marked by periodic skills shortages and poaching of skilled labour (Estevez-Abe et al., 2001; Finegold and Soskice, 1988); but the workplace focus means that employers are prepared to provide short-term adaptive CVT to support flexibility, even if this rarely results in a portable qualification.

## **Policy Determination**

In countries with a tradition of voluntarism, notably Ireland and the UK, historically the law has been much less prescriptive concerning social partner involvement in VET policy. Heidemann et al. (1994: 11) comment on the ‘almost total absence of social dialogue’ over VET in the UK. Nevertheless, in both countries the social partners play a major role in VET policy. In Ireland the Labour Services Act 1987 defines social partner involvement in developing national VET policy. Vocational training policy is established at national level by two tripartite bodies: the Training and Employment Authority (FÁS) and the State Tourism Training Agency. Since the late 1980s social partnership has been at the heart of the transformation of the economy and this is equally true of the VET reforms introduced.

The situation in the UK is quite different. In the 1980s Conservative governments disbanded the tripartite sectoral Industry Training Boards established by the Industrial Training Act 1964, and introduced a market-led system. However, even with these changes, there was significant social partner involvement: employers were given a leading role in establishing sector-level training arrangements and determining local training priorities through employer-led Industry Training Organizations (later National Training Organizations, and now tripartite Sector Skills Councils). Although no longer on a statutory footing, trade union involvement continued in most of these training bodies, even in sectors where union membership had virtually collapsed (Winterton and Winterton, 1994). Employer-led Training

and Enterprise Councils (TECs) in England and Wales (Local Enterprise Companies in Scotland) were also created to give employers a major role in ensuring that training provision matched local labour market needs. Trade union influence in the TECs was marginal in most cases, although in some areas there was local TUC representation on the management board. When, in April 2001, the Labour Government established the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) for England to deliver all post-16 education and training (excluding higher education), there was trade union representation on the national LSC Board and its local arms that replaced the TECs.

The Netherlands has possessed throughout the post-war era an intensive and elaborate system of negotiating and consultation between the government and the social partners, resulting among other things in wage restraint and employment growth. In the 1980s, the social partners increased the level and scope of negotiations on employability and training, and this resulted in the Wassenaar agreement of 1982 which is generally seen as a positive turning point to economic recovery after a major recession (Visser and Hemerijck, 1997). The Vocational and Adult Education Act (*Wet Educatie en Beroepsonderwijs*) defines the various means of formal communication and involvement of relevant actors at the various levels. The social partners are formally represented on the boards of the national vocational education bodies.

### Implementation

While social partner involvement in VET implementation at local level in the UK is inevitably patchy because of the absence of statutory support, attempts by successive Conservative governments to reduce trade union influence at sector level stimulated trade union interest in training matters at workplace level (Rainbird, 1990). While unions appear to have had only limited success in getting training on the bargaining agenda (Claydon and Green, 1992; TUC, 1998), several studies concluded that trade unions have a positive influence on training in general at workplace level in the UK (Green et al., 1999; Heyes and Stuart, 1998), particularly where employers sought union support for restructuring work organization (Winterton and Winterton, 1994). Employees are more likely to receive training in workplaces where trade unions are recognized and more likely to benefit from training when unions achieve an active role in training decisions at the workplace (Heyes and Stuart, 1998). Towards the end of the Conservative era, the unions had become the major advocates of learning at work, an approach that evidently influenced the *Union Learning Fund* initiative.

## Encouraging Participation in Learning

These VET systems have pioneered initiatives to promote lifelong learning and to encourage participation in learning at work. For example, the Dutch Government and the social partners agreed to develop a national lifelong learning strategy, with the target for 2010 to increase the vocational education participation rate of the population aged between 25 and 64 to the level of the two best performing Member States of the EU. Vocational education institutes will be developed into knowledge centres for lifelong learning, for which the social partners have a joint responsibility. The tripartite Advisory Committee on Education and the Labour Market is one of the bodies involved in redesigning the Dutch qualification structure to facilitate lifelong learning. Since the 1980s the number of collective agreements on education and training has increased substantially; in 2001 the Labour Inspectorate reported that clauses on employability were included in 86 out of the 117 agreements reviewed (SZW, 2001). Industry-level collective agreements in the Netherlands have established training levies in some 60 sectors, designed to harmonize training costs and reduce poaching of skilled labour.

Similarly in the UK, the new Labour Government in 1997 established the Skills Task Force and the National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning to develop an effective workforce through lifelong learning, encouraging informal learning through employee involvement and new work practices, and emphasizing the shared responsibility and partnership that must be developed to promote workplace learning. The Green Paper *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998) committed the Government to work with business, employees and their trade unions to support and develop skills in the workplace (Rainbird, 2000). In England, the Union Learning Fund was established in 1998, with the aim of using trade union influence to increase the take-up of learning at work, while boosting union capacity for delivering learning among trade unionists; and parallel schemes were later introduced in Wales and Scotland. During this time, TUC Learning Services developed the idea of Union Learning Representatives (ULRs), active union members but not necessarily existing lay officials, who provide advice, guidance and support to colleagues in activities related to learning and may negotiate with employers or providers to increase access to learning opportunities, a role that is especially important for low-skilled workers and those at risk. The *Employment Act 2002* provided statutory backing for learning representatives, a development that is widely viewed as improving trade union effectiveness in influencing VET and lifelong learning opportunities in the workplace. There is clear evidence that ULRs are having a significant impact on the creation and take-up of learning at work (Wallis et al., 2005).

## Discussion

This article set out to explore how common policies for increasing social dialogue over VET in Member States can be developed at European level, given the diversity of national systems of VET and structures of social dialogue. Developing a common approach to social dialogue over VET is a challenge in the face of the institutional differences identified, but the more necessary with the increasing Europeanization of VET systems through such initiatives as the European Credit Transfer System for VET and the European Qualifications Framework. The first objective was therefore to explore the extent to which countries already share common features in relation to social dialogue over VET policy, VET implementation and encouraging participation in learning.

In reviewing policies on lifelong learning in Europe, Heidemann (2002: 4) noted that while governments generally define the framework for lifelong learning, they invariably 'expect the social partners to be involved in fleshing out the framework provided'. The overall findings of this study similarly show that the social partners are involved to some extent in VET policy-making in all countries, irrespective of how the VET system is regulated. Citing research undertaken on behalf of the ETUC, Heidemann (2002: 5) concluded that since 2000, 'trade unions and work-force representatives are going beyond strategic discussions and becoming increasingly involved in the practical implementation of further training'. These trends are endorsed by the current study, which shows that in addition to their role in the formal structures of VET policy-making, the social partners are involved in all countries in various activities concerned with the implementation of VET actions, particularly at sector and local levels, developing curricula, new qualifications and on-the-job training.

In several countries, VET arrangements have become more decentralized since the 1990s, making VET, and especially CVT, more responsive to the transformation of industry and involving the social partners in practical implementation activities. The social partners' involvement in VET at company level varies with the form of regulation: in countries with voluntarist traditions, there is no statutory prescription of roles, and practice therefore varies substantially between individual employers. Social partner involvement in implementation is more extensive in countries where VET is focused on the workplace than in those where VET is focused on the school. Thus while the social partners in Belgium and France have a role in defining curricula, just as they do in Germany, they are not involved in recruitment of trainees, and employers have the final say on training priorities within the company.

Social partner initiatives to encourage participation in learning vary with both the type of regulation and the focus of VET. In countries where VET is regulated by the state, this takes the form of social partner involvement

in funding arrangements. Levy-grant systems are a common means of financing VET and the social partners are involved not only in so far as employers contribute to funds via the levy and claim grants in relation to training, but also in administering the funds, which in some countries involves the unions as well as the employers' associations. In recent years many countries have introduced individual learning accounts (as in the UK and Sweden) or training vouchers (as in Austria and Germany), both to encourage uptake of learning opportunities and to share the costs of learning, one of the principles endemic to European lifelong learning policies.

Collective agreements to promote VET at local level are evident in several countries, irrespective of the degree of state regulation of VET. However, social partner involvement in initiatives to promote lifelong learning and to encourage participation in learning at work is most developed in the market-led, workplace-focused VET systems. The explanation is perhaps that the trade unions cannot depend upon state support and are therefore obliged to engage with employers to increase learning opportunities (Rainbird, 2000). Indeed, what is arguably the most important social partner led innovation focused on increasing the take-up of learning opportunities (ULRs) has come out of the UK, where statutory support for social dialogue is absent. A similar initiative is being considered at selected workplaces by the German IG Metall.

Notwithstanding the persistence of differences in VET systems and models of social dialogue, differences between the countries appear to be less than might be anticipated from the different forms of VET regulation and stereotypical models of labour relations. There are commonalities that cross the labour relations typologies as well as differences within them, which may reflect convergence occurring with transfer of good practice, the limitations of the traditional typologies, or both of these.

The *Framework of Actions for the Lifelong Development of Competencies and Qualifications* is likely to increase the role of social dialogue in promoting VET and lifelong learning, especially in relation to the development of curricula and qualifications; the provision of information advice and guidance; and evaluating the impact on both companies and workers. The social partners produce annual reports on progress in the priority areas identified and the Social Dialogue ad hoc Group on Education and Training is undertaking an overall evaluation. Vind et al. (2004) see the *Framework of Actions* as a platform for promoting trade union influence in the process of implementing lifelong learning policies at European level, but recognize that there is a need for further elaboration of the strategy at European level and for more detailed monitoring and analysis of actions at national level. In reviewing such actions in Denmark, France, Germany and the UK, they conclude that the unions are actively seeking new roles in promoting lifelong learning through collective agreements on practical issues such as time accounts, acting as 'intermediaries' at the interface of



individuals and learning opportunities, participating in the quality assurance of VET and encouraging a learning culture at work. However, such initiatives at present are not strategically coordinated at EU level, something that is increasingly necessary with enlargement of the EU.

The weakness of sectoral dialogue in the candidate countries, acknowledged in a recent ILO report (Ghelleb and Vaughan-Whitehead, 2003), is a marked contrast with the role of social partners in sectoral dialogue committees at EU level, which often result in framework agreements that are converted into EC directives (Winterton and Strandberg, 2004). As Ladó and Vaughan-Whitehead note (2003: 83), 'without similar structures, social partners from candidate countries will have serious difficulties in discussing and negotiating sectoral issues at EU level'. Hence, also, the vital importance of strengthening the sectoral dimension of European social dialogue (EC, 2003). More resources must be devoted to increase training activities for trade union officials in the CEE countries, building on the twin-track approach of responding to the specific training needs of CEE trade unions and at the same time promoting their participation in pan-European trade union activities (Bridgford et al., 2003). Several commentators have noted that in some of the new Member States and candidate countries governments deliberately obstruct the social dialogue process and only enable a consultative role for the social partners (Draus, 2000; Winterton and Strandberg, 2004). The EC must therefore intervene more forcefully to support social dialogue in these countries (EC, 2004). Without such a strategy, the major fear is that the weakness of the social dialogue process in some of the new Member States could undermine its effectiveness at EU level or create a lowest common denominator approach, where it becomes marginalized.

## Conclusion

This study suggests that in the case of social dialogue over VET, the nature of regulation of the VET system and its dominant focus, whether school or workplace, are contextual factors that serve to promote or constrain social partner involvement. State-regulated systems facilitate a clearly prescribed role for the social partners whereas market systems are associated with uneven involvement. Social dialogue in school-focused systems is inevitably less developed than in workplace-focused systems, since school-led VET is divorced from the domain where the social partners have most competence. No single approach can be considered a model for social dialogue over VET, let alone a model for VET itself, since there are merits in three of the different ideal-types. The state-regulated workplace model offers solutions better adapted to labour market needs than the state-regulated school model, while the market-led workplace model is conducive to more flexible and

responsive adaptive training. There are inherent contradictions in the market-led school model.

The steady integration of VET activities and qualifications at European level may be expected to demand more coordinated action by the social partners, which should promote convergence. At the same time, however, if VET is to become more relevant to labour market needs, it must also become increasingly workplace focused and it therefore follows that the centre of gravity of social dialogue will be more decentralized, a trend that is likely to promote divergence. If the social partners are to play an enhanced role, as the Commission regularly exhorts them to do, this in turn will require state regulation to prescribe clear roles and provide underpinning statutory support. Such developments will be slow and path dependent, given the heavy institutional constructs of existing VET systems and social dialogue arrangements. Ambiguity is inevitable in future trajectories, with divergence and convergence continuing to occur simultaneously. In many countries VET is already state-regulated in some respects and market-led in others, while both school- and workplace-focus is found not only in countries with the dual system but also where employers are reacting to school-led provision that fails to meet labour market needs. The prognosis for social dialogue over VET, in so far as it is prudent to make one, is for increasing diversity within Member States leading to greater convergence between them. The challenge for the Commission and the European social partners is to manage this process and facilitate transfer of learning and practice between Member States and sectors.

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